



Research article

## Expressions of shame in investigative interviews with Australian Aboriginal children



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### ABSTRACT

This study inspected a sample of 70 interview transcripts with Australian Aboriginal children to gain a sense of how frequently verbal shame responses were occurring in investigative interviews regarding alleged sexual abuse. Transcripts were examined to determine how children articulated shame, how interviewers reacted to these responses, and how shame related to children's accounts. Examination of frequencies revealed that verbal shame responses occurred in just over one-quarter of the interviews. One-way analyses of variance indicated that children who expressed shame within the interview spoke the same amount as children who did not express shame, however, they required more interviewer prompts before a disclosure was made. Interviews where children expressed shame also included a greater number of interviewer reminders compared to interviews without shame responses. Results emphasize the importance of interviewer awareness of shame, and also point to the value of reassurance, patience, and persistence with non-leading narrative prompting when interviewing children who express shame during discussions of sexual abuse.

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### Introduction

In many cases of child sexual abuse, child victims are left feeling a sense of shame (Fontes & Plummer, 2010; Fontes, 2007; Hunter, 2011; McEvoy & Daniluk, 1995). Offenders may instill feelings of shame in children at the time of the abuse (Deblinger & Runyon, 2005), and negative reactions by others to the sexual abuse disclosure can further reinforce feelings of shame (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985). Along with additional barriers, shame can significantly impede a child's ability to recover from the abuse. Indeed, research has found that children experiencing lower levels of shame are more likely to be better-adjusted one year after a sexual abuse disclosure compared to children experiencing higher levels (Feiring, Taska, & Lewis, 2002). While the concept of shame is present in many cultures, the current paper focuses on shame in Australian Aboriginal culture.

#### Shame in Australian Aboriginal Culture

For many Aboriginal peoples, shame is a complex matter that is notably different to the Western version of feeling ashamed (Harkins, 1990, 1994; Sharifian, 2005). In a semantic analysis on the Aboriginal English use of the term shame,

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Harkins (1990) notes that Aboriginal peoples often report feeling shame in situations where non-Aboriginal peoples would not speak of being ashamed. For example, shame may be felt when one is the center of attention, when receiving praise, when meeting strangers, in the presence of close relatives, when passing near a forbidden place, or when exposed to secret ceremony information. Most commonly, shame in Aboriginal culture includes a fear of negative consequences arising from a perceived wrongdoing, a fear of disapproval and a strong desire to escape the unpleasant situation (Harkins, 1990).

Similar conceptualizations of shame have also been found in ethnographic research by Sharifian (2005). In his study, 30 Aboriginal and 30 non-Aboriginal children from Western Australian primary schools were exposed to a list of words, one of which included the term shame. Results indicated that different cultural schemas or "world views" were related to the word shame. For non-Aboriginal children, the word shame was associated with guilt or misdemeanors. For Aboriginal children, however, the term shame prompted schemas related to praise, respect, punishment, unfamiliarity or being spotlighted in a group. Interestingly, both sets of research have also found that the syntax of shame differs between the two cultures: whereas non-Aboriginal peoples may speak of "feeling ashamed", Aboriginal peoples are more likely to speak of "getting" or "being" shame (e.g., "I've got shame"; "big shame"; "that's a shame-job") (Harkins, 1990; Sharifian, 2005).

### *Shame and Disclosures of Sexual Abuse*

It is well documented that shame can inhibit or delay the disclosure of sexual abuse by both Aboriginal (Gordon, Hallahan, & Henry, 2002; New South Wales Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce [NSWACSAT], 2006; Robertson, 2000) and non-Aboriginal children (Bonanno et al., 2002; Furniss, 1991; Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003; Hershkowitz, Lanes, & Lamb, 2007; Hunter, 2011). In research conducted for the *Breaking the Silence Report*, consultations with over 300 people from 29 Aboriginal communities in NSW revealed that shame was a common consequence of child sexual assault and that it often prevented children from reporting sexual abuse to authorities. It was explained that Aboriginal victims may feel responsible for "letting the abuse happen" and their feelings of shame are often compounded by taboos regarding the open discussion of sexual issues, a lack of understanding regarding sexual assault, a mistrust of authority agencies and a fear or past experience of retaliation or of not being believed (Coorey, 2001; NSWACSAT, 2006).

When focusing on non-Aboriginal children, a longitudinal study with 137 survivors of child sexual abuse has demonstrated that participants who did not make a voluntary disclosure exhibited more facial expressions of shame (e.g., eye-contact avoidance, downward head movements) during an interview compared to those who made a voluntary disclosure of child sexual abuse (Bonanno et al., 2002). Further, in another study with 30 non-Aboriginal children, 50% reported feeling fear or shame regarding their parents' reactions to a sexual abuse disclosure (Hershkowitz et al., 2007). These feelings were more likely to be expressed if the offenders were familiar to the child or if the abuse was repeated and severe. Moreover, expressions of shame were positively associated with delays in disclosure. Other factors associated with delayed disclosures are expected negative consequences to the child or a non-offending family member (Malloy, Brubacher, & Lamb, 2011), expectations about not being believed (Malloy, Brubacher, & Lamb, 2013), increased age (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003), lack of maternal support (Elliott & Briere, 1994) and a familiar relationship to the offender (Olafson & Lederman, 2006; Paine & Hansen, 2002).

In an effort to promote awareness, education, and reporting of child sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities, a number of initiatives have been developed that take shame into account (Mace, Powell, & Benson, 2015; NSWACSAT, 2006; Thorpe, Solomon, & Dimopoulos, 2004). For example, a video resource called Big Shame has been created for workers to use in activities with Aboriginal children; it provides a common child sexual abuse scenario and demonstrates what action needs to take place to protect the child (NSWACSAT, 2006). Further, in a qualitative evaluation of Operation RESET, a multi-agency strategy designed to tackle child sexual abuse in Western Australian Aboriginal communities, one participant highlighted that a benefit of the approach was the transience of service providers, as shame may prevent victims from reporting sexual abuse to local, permanent, and well-known staff (Mace et al., 2015).

### *The Current Study*

While efforts have begun to address shame in regards to the initial reporting of abuse, there is a lack of work that focuses on shame during the investigative interview. One of the essential parts of every investigation of child sexual abuse is the child investigative interview, which can be video-taped and used as the child's evidence-in-chief should the matter proceed to court (Ministry of Justice, 2011; Office of Director of Public Prosecutions [ACT] & Australian Federal Police, 2005). As the interview with the child forms a dominant part of the evidence, the child's narrative of the sexual abuse needs to be as complete and detailed as possible. A concern that has been outlined in the literature, however, is that feelings of shame could hinder a child's willingness to discuss sexual abuse in an investigative interview (Hamilton, Powell, & Brubacher, in press; Lamb & Brown, 2006). Given the complexity of shame in Aboriginal culture, it is particularly important to examine this concept in an Aboriginal population. Preliminary research is needed to explore how shame is expressed and discussed in investigative interviews with Aboriginal children to determine how best to move forward in combating its effects.

Anecdotally, we had been informed by police officers and child protection workers that Aboriginal children often express shame in investigative interviews. In the current study, we inspected a sample of interview transcripts with Aboriginal children to gain a sense of how frequently verbal shame responses were occurring in investigative interviews regarding alleged sexual abuse. We also aimed to characterize how Aboriginal children articulated shame in investigative interviews,

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